

*“Do you have a plan to deal with a catastrophic outage?
What will you do?”*

—Charlie Adams, TCEQ Technical Specialist, Small Business
and Local Government Assistance Program

STATE AGENCIES TEAM UP TO HELP WATER SYSTEMS PLAN TO PREVENT EMERGENCY SHORTAGES

The TCEQ hosts a well-received series of workshops around the state to help water system operators enhance their drought emergency planning



Photos of O.C. Fisher Reservoir near San Angelo, courtesy of Earl Nottingham/FPWD

A hurricane, flood, or tornado can hit with sudden, deadly force. But you can take precautions—fill sand bags, board up windows, and move out of harm’s way—because forecasters can usually see it coming. Further, this is the kind of disaster

that government officials have experience responding to.

But droughts are sneaky—you can’t quite pinpoint when a drought begins or ends. The rains don’t come often enough. Temperatures rise to extreme levels. Evaporation accelerates as water use increases,

lowering levels in lakes, creeks, streams, and reservoirs. And then suddenly, the water-intake pump for your water supplier is sucking up mud—or air.

TCEQ and Partner Agencies Hold Workshops

What can an operator of a water utility do to avoid running out of water? That’s the question the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and other state agencies are addressing in a series of workshops being held around the state.

In these drought emergency management workshops, representatives of the TCEQ, Texas Division of Emergency Management, Texas Department of Agriculture, Texas Water Development Board, and Texas Water Infrastructure Coordinating Committee meet with water utility operators to encourage and help them to plan ahead to avoid expensive, emergency situations.

The first workshop was held on Jan. 26 in Nacogdoches, where almost 100 people from throughout the region listened to speakers explain the problem and offer solutions. Audience members had questions covering a wide range of



topics, such as long-range water planning and the proper timetable for drilling an emergency well.

Subsequent workshops were held in Kerrville, New Braunfels, Liberty, Midland, Lubbock, and San Angelo. In each case, rooms were filled with participants, engaged and eager to get answers to questions related to their specific regions. Plans are being made to host another workshop in Brownsville at a later date.

Drought Could Continue

The drought that ravaged the state in 2011 was the most severe one-year drought in Texas history. There have been as many as 15 instances—in several water basins in the state—in which some water-rights holders have had to curtail diversion of water in favor of those with senior water rights. East Texas operators, usually flush with rain, have seen restrictions on watering from [drought contingency plans](#) they have never before had to use.

“The TCEQ, and our partner agencies, recognized that the winter respite and the beneficial rains we’ve had gave us some time to reach out directly to these systems, connect them to our agency and funding agencies, and hear directly what their conditions on the ground are and what they’re dealing with,” said Brian Christian, director of the TCEQ’s Small Business and Environmental Assistance Division. “This

will help us customize our assistance and get them the help they need.”

Workshops Offer Options

Charlie Adams’ workday typically has him talking to small-business owners one-on-one and assisting TCEQ staffers and the public in developing rules. In his position as a technical specialist for the TCEQ’s Small Business and Local Government Assistance Program in the Beaumont region, he is accustomed to answering questions such as “Do I need a permit?” and “How do I fill out this form?”

However, the first quarter of 2012 found him in a new role as a public speaker dealing with subjects he had not often considered in his 11-year tenure with the agency. At the workshops, Adams is coordinating messages from the multiple agencies and asking the water system operators to do something many of them are not always skilled in—planning ahead.

After giving an overview of the severity of the drought, he confronts water system operators with the blunt question “Do you have a plan to deal with a catastrophic outage? What will you do?”

He urges them to look at their drought contingency plans to see if the triggers for restricting water use make sense in light of increases in population and last summer’s brutal

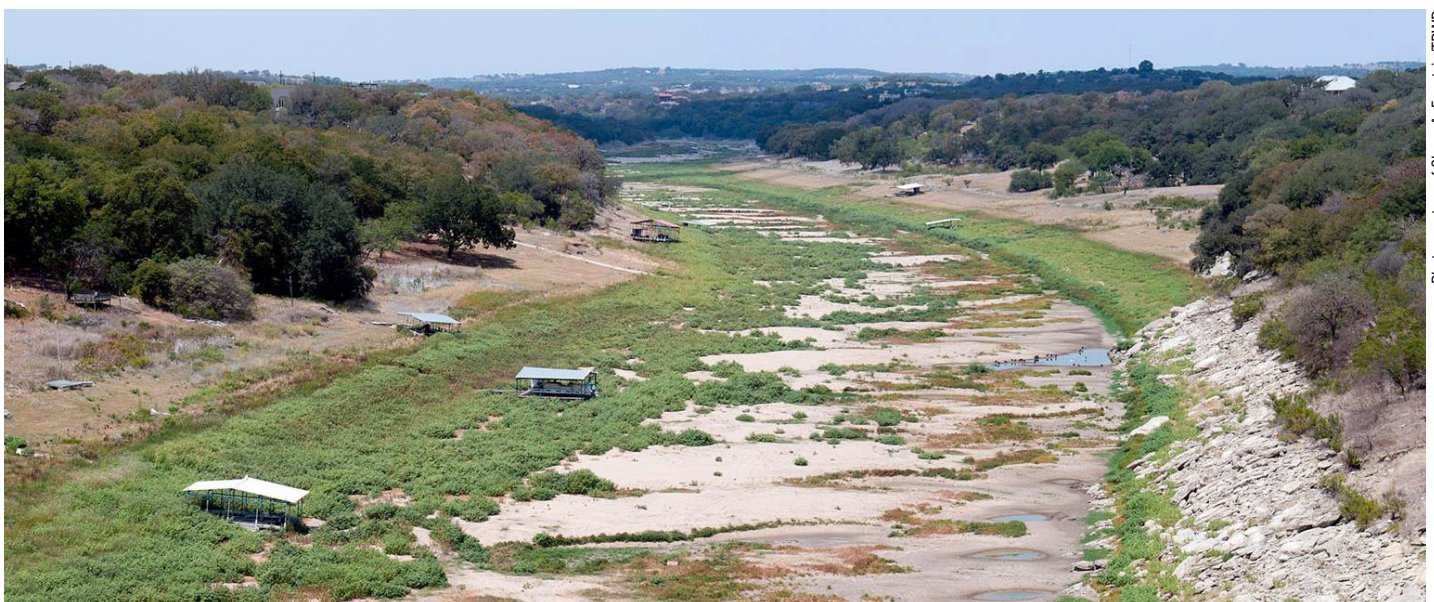
heat. He challenges them to review their emergency planning to identify well drillers, alternative sources of water, possible interconnections, and even licensed haulers before they are needed.

State Agencies Band Together to Help

The drought also has state agencies working together in a way Adams has not seen before. “That’s one of the things that has really changed,” says Adams. “Though I was aware of the Texas Water Development Board, I didn’t have any direct experience with them. And now, we are working together closely to help operators identify resources.”

At the workshops, funding and planning experts from other state agencies joined TCEQ Office of Water personnel on a panel. The panelist from the Texas Water Development Board answered questions about long-range water planning. (To watch a video on ways to extend water supplies, go to www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/outlook-0312.)

The TWDB has grant funding available to assist public water systems in expanding water supplies. The TWDB also provides technical assistance by giving systems vital information on groundwater availability in a given area that systems can use to successfully drill new groundwater wells.



Boat docks were stranded by the dwindling flows of the Pedernales River last year.

Photo courtesy of Chase A. Fountain/TPWD

The Texas Department of Agriculture was also represented on the panel. The TDA administers federal funds aimed at providing long-term solutions to systems facing water shortage. (To see a video on funding opportunities through the TWDB and TDA, go to www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/outlook-0312.)

On July 5, 2011, Gov. Rick Perry issued an Emergency Disaster Proclamation certifying that exceptional drought conditions posed a threat of imminent disaster in specified counties in Texas. This proclamation, which has been extended over the course of the drought to most of the counties in Texas, gives state regulators some leeway in enforcement

to allow for expedited action in an emergency situation. The Texas Department of Emergency Management has been collaborating with the other agencies to work with communities that are in danger of running out of water to identify possible emergency sources in case outages occur. The TDEM coordinates emergency response through local, state, and federal authorities where applicable, as detailed in the [Emergency Drinking Water Contingency Annex](#) [PDF] of the State of Texas Drought Preparedness Plan. A TDEM representative was also on the panel, explaining the process to operators. (To see a video about the process water systems must follow to get emergency

assistance, go to www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/outlook-0312.)

The state cannot make decisions for public water systems on how to supply water to their customers. However, these workshops demonstrate that state agencies can work together to point out options and offer technical assistance before catastrophe strikes. ☼☼

Related Links

Drought workshop video:
www.tceq.texas.gov/goto/outlook-0312

TCEQ Texas drought information:
www.tceq.texas.gov/response/drought



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